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ABSTRACT

Relationship dissolution is generally examined within the context of romantic involvement but rarely from the standpoint of friendship. To examine patterns of friendship dissolution in young adults, retrospective accounts of recently terminated or deteriorated same-sex friendships and changes in friendship networks over the last 5 years were examined for 155 college students. Four patterns of friendship dissolution were identified: physical separation, new friends replace old, growing to dislike the friend, and interference from dating or marriage. The transition to college resulted in a higher rate of deteriorated friendships than was evident during the high school years, particularly for women. Significant gender differences in patterns of termination were also found; physical separation was more likely to precipitate dissolution in men's friendships, and dating or marriage were more likely to interfere with women's. In addition, women assumed significantly more responsibility for the termination than men. The findings suggest that previous experience with long distance or absent friends is a factor which should be considered when exploring termination patterns. (Author/JAC)

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Friendship Termination Patterns of College Women and Men

ABSTRACT

College women's and men's retrospective accounts of recently terminated or deteriorated close same-sex friendships and changes in their friendship networks over the past five years were examined. Four patterns of friendship dissolution were identified: physical separation, new friends replace old, growing to dislike the friend, and interference from dating or marriage. The transition to college resulted in a higher rate of deteriorated friendships than was evident during the high school years, particularly for women. Significant gender differences in patterns of termination were also found: physical separation was more likely to precipitate dissolution in men's friendships, and dating or marriage was more likely to interfere with women's. In addition, women assumed significantly more responsibility for the termination than men. The results are discussed in terms of how the experiences of the young adult lifestage might result in the termination patterns observed.

Friendship Termination Patterns of

College Women and Men

Relationship dissolution is generally examined within the context of romantic involvements (e.g., Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Duck, 1982; LaGaipa, 1982; Levinger, 1980, 1983), but seldom from the standpoint of friendship. Perspectives on the dissolution of love relationships are sometimes applicable to friendship deterioration as well, but the distinctions between friendship and romantic relationships often limit the generalizability of theory and findings. For instance, in describing the ending of romantic relationships, Duck (1982) posits an initial "breakdown" phase during which dissatisfaction with the relationship occurs and a threshold, "I can't stand it anymore," is reached. Friendships, however, may dissolve without ever experiencing a breakdown. Simple lack of proximity, a move to another city, can cause a gradual fading of even a best friendship without any overt dissatisfaction.

Friendship termination cannot be explained as merely a reversal of the process of becoming and staying friends, either. Rather than viewing termination as the mirror-image of formation, Duck (1982) and Duck and Lea (1982) argue that it is a separate process. For example, one friend's information about the other is not reduced as the relationship ends, as would be expected in a simple reversal. Thus, there is a need to examine friendship termination independent of formation processes and to

distinguish it from other close relationship endings.

One model of disengagement that is applicable to friendship has been proposed by Rodin (1982). In the model, four conditions are identified that separately or in combination can lead to the dissolution of established relationships. First, one's friends may do or say something that suddenly meets one's "dislike criteria," that is, may violate some expectancy strongly associated with friendship. Lying might be in this category. Or second, our "like criteria" may change; we may begin to look for different things in friends, or friends may change and no longer meet our like criteria. Third, a friend may be displaced. A new acquaintance may meet more of one's like criteria or meet them better than an old friend and gradually displace the friend. Last, termination may also occur when the pleasure/cost ratio deviates too far from an ideal point, either through reduced pleasure, as in the case of boredom, or through too little or too great a cost.

Both an individual's place in the life cycle and gender are likely to influence what disengagement conditions are met and how. Young adults' friendships during the high school and college years, for instance, will be less affected by the competing interests of career and family that interfere with older adults' nonkin relationships. In later adulthood, differing career choices, income levels, and status differences often weaken old friendship ties, too. However, sharing a student role will guarantee certain commonalities of experience that can provide a continuing basis for young people's friendships.

One factor which is likely to affect friendship termination during the young adult lifestage is the physical and psychological separation of friends that occurs during the transition from high school to college. Second, an increased commitment to romantic relationships should cause a withdrawal from the friendship network for the college age group (Milardo, Johnson & Huston, 1983; Weinstein, 1982).

Establishing a heterosexual relationship will probably affect the termination of women's same-sex friendships more strongly than men's. Babchuk (1965), Troll (1975), and Bell (1981a) noted a pattern in married couples in which the husband's friends became the couples' friends. Women's friends were less integrated into the marital network. If the same pattern occurs in dating couples, then the advent of a romantic relationship could either displace women's same-sex friendships or intensify the cost of maintaining them in terms of difficulty of scheduling interactions or committing time to them.

Another gender difference in friendship termination has been reported by La Gaipa (1979). The adolescent girls he studied were more likely to attribute the end of a friendship to interference from a third female friend, unlike boys. The third party termination pattern has not been demonstrated as common for adult women, however.

How gender affects other aspects of termination for this age group is unknown. Gender differences in ongoing friendships indicate that intimacy is more strongly associated with women's friendships (e.g., Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Fischer & Narus, 1981; Hill & Stull, 1981); whereas the basis of men's is common

interests (Tognoli, 1980; Bell, 1981b). Whether a sudden loss of intimacy will then lead to decline in women's friendships or whether a change of interests will dissolve men's remains to be determined.

A methodological problem connected with studying relationship termination has been mentioned by Levinger (1980). Because it is difficult for individuals to distinguish temporary downswings from absolute declines while they are occurring, termination is most often identifiable only in retrospect. While retrospective reports do not provide the most accurate account of what ended a friendship due to reinterpretation of the event later (Duck, 1982), they do at least reflect people's current perceptions of what occurred. Interpretations, the feelings associated with them, and individuals' self-assessments of what they could have done differently in a friendship are useful to understanding part of the process of friendship termination (Johnson, 1982).

In the present study, retrospective accounts of a recently terminated or deteriorated same-sex close friendship of college women and men were used to examine patterns of friendship dissolution in young adults. The first goal of the study was to determine the major causes and frequency of friendship termination during high school and college. It was predicted that going to college would precipitate the loss of close same-sex friendships from high school. A second objective was to investigate gender differences in friendship dissolution. Specifically, it was hypothesized that a) more women

would have lost a close same-sex friend in the past five years than men, and b) dating or marriage would be a more likely cause of friendship dissolution for women than for men.

METHOD

Sample

Subjects were 155 undergraduates, 91 women and 64 men between the ages of 17-22 years, recruited from introductory psychology classes at a large midwestern university, with an urban campus and commuter population.

Procedure

Subjects were asked to list their current close friends and any close friendships which had terminated or declined within the past five years, specifying at what age they had established each friendship and how long it had continued. An explanation of what, if anything, subjects wished they had done differently during the friendship also was elicited.

Next, subjects were asked to write an essay describing the decline of one close same-sex friendship that had terminated in high school or since, if they had one. Instructions requested Ss to describe what they liked and disliked about the friendship, and how and why it ended or declined.

In addition, Ss were asked to specify how satisfied they had been with the friendship when it was at its peak, how much the loss of the friendship had affected them, how significant the loss was to them in terms of what was important in their lives, and how much responsibility they assumed for the decline (5-point scales).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Four basic patterns of close friendship termination or decline were identifiable from the 89 essays (59 women, 30 men) of subjects who had ended a friendship in high school or since: physical separation, new friends replace old, friend revealed or did something that met subject's dislike criteria, and interference due to dating or marriage. Agreement on classification of essays into categories between two independent raters was 94%.

A. Physical Separation. In some cases, moving to a new house or city was the cause of separation. Often subjects stated they had failed to give or obtain the friend's new address before the move. Even with the new address, maintaining a long-distance friendship was difficult for most, who frequently lacked the resources to visit or call their friend. Some made consistent efforts, however, as indicated by an 18 year old woman's account of a friendship which ended due to a move:

> "The decline in our friendship happened when I moved. After I moved we saw each other regularly and talked on the phone all the time. We also would spend weekends together. But it just wasn't the same. We are still friends now but we aren't as close."

Separations caused by going to different schools were also common. In some instances, the friends went to different colleges, and the same pattern of drifting apart occurred as for separations caused by moving. In a few other cases, one friend was older than the other, so the transition from high school to college was not a shared experience. One 19 year old male described this type of ending as follows:

"When I was at college in town and he was a

> senior in high school, a separation came up. We did not have a fight or quarrel, but he leaned away from me so he could involve himself with his senior buddies. It is very understandable that this was his last high school year and he should make the most of it, but it was wrong for him to just drop me."

Some subjects cited other less drastic separations as dissolving their close friendships. A change in jobs, a change of classes, no longer sharing locker space, or switching from one sport program to another were some examples given.

> "For the three years I worked with C.E. I was the only friend he kept and he was the only friend I kept the entire time. Most of our time together was spent drinking if we were off work. When I was fired I got another job and we hardly ever saw each other." (21 year old man)

B. New Friends. Sometimes subjects indicated that old friends had simply been replaced by new ones. A few reported feeling jealous, angry, or rejected by the friend, but for most subjects this transition was amiable.

> "We were pretty close friends in high school. Afterwards we started finding more friends and we didn't do as much as we used to. From then it just turned into a casual friendship. After high school we didn't see each other hardly at all." (18 year old man)

C. Dislike. Frequently subjects reported that friendships ended because the friend revealed or did something that met their "dislike criteria." A wide variety of behaviors were reported to result in dislike, including hostility, religious differences, drug abuse, betrayal, physical violence, and criticism.

> "I liked my relationship with R.R. because we were about equal in our beliefs or morals. Around the beginning of last year she started having problems with alcohol and her parents. I tried to help her in every way I thought of until I finally told her if she didn't straighten up our friendship was through." (19 year old woman)

> "A few people told me that Jim treated girls like dirt. I didn't believe it. I set him up with my girlfriend's best friend. He treated her great for a while, but then he started going out on her. I found out about it. It was hard to believe because he'd told me he didn't do that. Well, that lost a good friendship." (19 year old man)

D. Dating or Marriage. Establishing a heterosexual relationship was the fourth major pattern of close friendship dissolution.

> "Neither of us had boyfriends so we went out to the bars a lot. During the summer we swam at her apartment frequently. After she moved in with a guy I saw her a lot less." (21 year old woman)

A number of subjects (41.6%, N=37) viewed termination as a process involving more than one step. For example, one subject reported moving to be the initial cause of the decline, but then the separated friends started dating and never saw each other again. Secondary causes of termination included physical separation, new friends, dislike, dating or marriage, and a fifth category, competing interests, i.e., work or leisure activities were mentioned as more important than the friendship, causing it to decline.

Table 1 shows the frequencies with which different patterns of primary and secondary causes were used to describe termination. No consistent pattern is apparent. Rather, it seems that once a friendship has been "weakened" by a move, new friends, dislike, or a romantic relationship, almost any other stress on the friendship can result in dissolution.

Insert Table 1 about here

Unlike the "breakdown" phase of romantic relationship dissolution (Duck, 1982), the friendship termination process observed in the present study was much more likely to be precipitated by external factors, such as a physical separation, than by internal problems. Relatively few subjects "couldn't stand it any more," i.e., disliked the friendship so much they decided to end it.

Perhaps because friendship termination often lacked this clear-cut emotional response, little negotiation about how the relationship was to end occurred. Without the external structural restraints associated with love relationships like public announcements to friends and family, many friendships seemed to deteriorate past the point of being salvaged without subjects noting their decline.

This failure to monitor the friendship was cited as a source of regret in many subjects explanations of what, if anything, they would change if they could relive the friendship. Over 47% stated they wished they'd made more effort to maintain the friendship or wished they'd been more open with their friend about how important the relationship was to them.

The results do not indicate directly how the termination process differs from forming and maintaining friendships. Three of the patterns (separation, dislike, and dating or marriage) suggest that some endings are fairly abrupt, involving a complete cessation of interaction. However, the associated emotions appear to decline more gradually. The lack of congruence between actions and feelings may be one area in which termination differs substantially from formation and

maintenance processes.

Lifestage and Gender

As hypothesized, the transition from high school to college coincided with a higher rate of friendship dissolution than the pre-college years. Also as predicted, more women terminated friendships than men. During high school, 25.3% (N=23) of the 91 women and 17.2% (N= 11) of the 64 men comprising the complete sample reported having one or more close same-sex friendships end. For the period from high school to the present, the figures rose to 49.4% (N=45) for women and 35.9% (N = 23) for men.

During the one to two year college period studied, new friends were also being added to the network. About 41.2% (N = 38) of the women and 31.2% (N = 20) of the men had established one or more new friendships.

The results suggest that the transition to college results in a restructuring of the friendship network. Due to the smaller size of men's networks, the impact of restructuring was somewhat greater. Men had a mean of 3.76 (SD = 1.54) friends compared to 4.40 (SD = 2.48) for women, $F(1,82) = 3.68$, $p < .05$.

The effect of the college experience on the friendships of the present sample is probably conservative compared to what students at universities with residential facilities experience. Even so, given that most of the subjects were natives of the area, and therefore had high school friends living locally, the loss and gain of one or more friends in about a one year period represents a more than 25% change in the networks of subjects who had ended a friendship.

As shown in Table 2, women's patterns of termination differed significantly from men's, likelihood ratio chisquare = 10.56, df = 3, $p < .05$. Compared to women, dissolved male friendships were more often precipitated by physical separation. Dating or marriage, however, was more likely to have interfered with women's same-sex friendships, as predicted. Contrary to LaGaipa's (1979) findings for adolescent girls, college age women were not any more likely than men to have a new same-sex friend replace the old one.

Insert Table 2 about here

Ratings of satisfaction with the friendship when it was at its peak, the significance of the loss in terms of what was important in life, how much the loss had affected subjects, and how much responsibility they assumed for its decline were analyzed using 2 X 2 analyses of variance (sex X termination cause). No significant effect of termination cause on any of the ratings was found.

On a five-point scale (1 = not at all responsible, 5 = entirely responsible), women ($M = 2.61$) assumed significantly more reponsibility for the dissolution than men ($M = 2.07$), $F(1,82) = 6.88$, $p < .01$. Gender did not affect ratings of satisfaction with the friendship when it was at its peak ($M = 3.51$), significance of loss ($M = 2.71$), or how deeply the loss had affected subjects ($M = 2.16$), 5-point scales (5 = highly satisfied, very significant, and very deeply, respectively).

Although women accepted closer to equal responsibility for the termination than men, very few individuals attributed more

than equal responsibility to themselves. How to interpret this finding is unclear. The recognition of one's own impact on the friendship could be a sign of maturity, or it could be a face-saving devise, allowing the person to feel less rejection in a dissolving relationship. Further research would be necessary to explain the meaning of accepting responsibility in friendships.

The moderate ratings obtained on the quality of friendship measures indicate that the friendships were a rather modest priority in life for both the young men and women studied. A number of subjects seemed to be reevaluating the priority of friendship ties relative to other relationships or concerns, however. Some had made a decision to pay a higher "cost" for friendship in the future. For instance, several young women stated that if they could relive the friendship, they "would not let a man stand in the way of a friendship." Others mentioned that they "wouldn't let a petty argument ruin a good friendship," or "wouldn't take the friend for granted." One subject assessed his responsibility in this way:

> "If I could do it over, I would confront him bluntly and sooner. I would try to compromise with him. I believe that if you wait too long, a relationship can reach a point of no return. With my other friends now, I try to resolve conflicts quickly before they build into bombshells.

These comments suggest that failed friendships may play an important role in the development of personal responsibility and growth. Further research should focus on the impact of termination experiences on conceptions of friendship and maintenance strategies.

Conclusions

The results indicate that the college years are a period of change in young adults' friendships. The precipitators of change appear to be different for women and men. Heterosexual relationships more severely deter women's same-sex friendships than men's. In contrast, men are more inclined to allow physical separation to interfere with friendships.

The increased rate of friendship dissolution during the college transition could be a result of lack of daily contact, particularly for the physical separation and dating or marriage patterns. In high school, close friendships are maintained almost exclusively through daily contact (Weiss & Lowenthal, 1975). Therefore, the college years may be many young people's first experience with absent friends.

Continuing friendships without the environmentally imposed contact of high school requires a cognitive shift to a more abstract concept of a friend, one in which the physical presence of the friend is not necessary for the continuation of emotional bonds. Effective strategies for maintaining a stable level of emotional involvement without daily contact may take time to develop.

The results of the present study suggest that previous experience with long distance or absent friends is a factor which should be taken into account when exploring termination patterns. In addition, because people's strategies to maintain friendship may be based, in part, on experience with failed friendships, research on individual differences in friendship maintenance should also assess young adults' termination histories.

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Table 1

Frequencies of Primary and Secondary

Causes of Termination

	Causes				
	Physical Separation	New Friends	Dislike	Dating or Marriage	Total
Primary	42	16	20	11	89
Secondary					
Physical Separation	4	1	2	4	11
New Friends	5	1	1		7
Dislike	4	2	3	3	12
Dating or Marriage	3	1	1		5
Competing Interests	2				2

Table 2

Primary Causes of Termination by Sex (Percent)

Cause	Women (N=59)	Men (N=30)
Physical Separation	42.4	56.7
New Friends	18.6	16.7
Dislike	20.3	26.7
Dating or Marriage	18.6	0.0
Total	100.0	100.1